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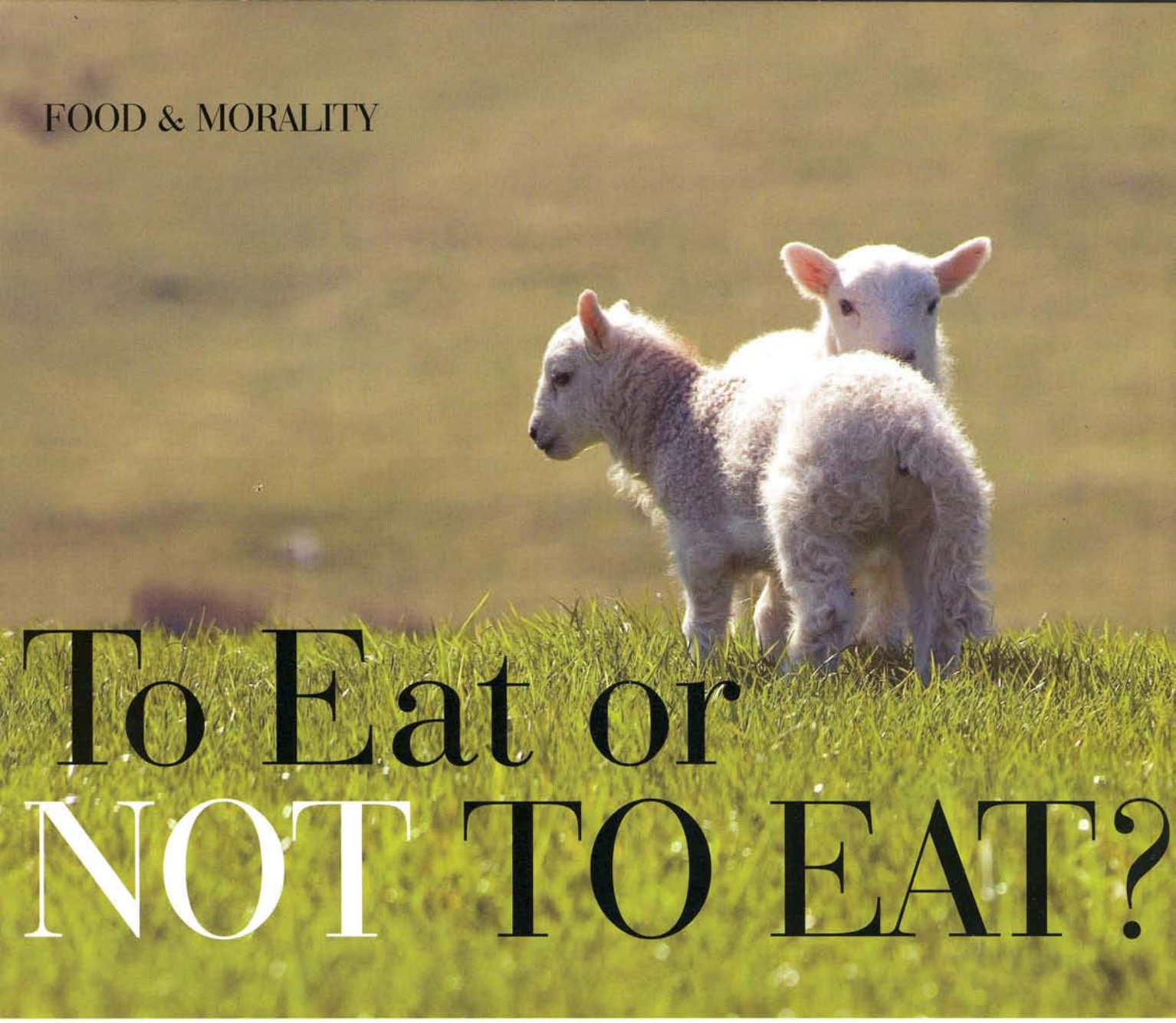

To Eat or NOT TO EAT?

MÁIRTÍN MAC CON IOMAIRE listens to both sides of the ethical debate at this year's Oxford Symposium

Are we morally obliged to know where our food comes from, how it is produced, what its carbon footprint is, and whether it is traded fairly? Is it more environmentally friendly to eat New Zealand lamb or Oxford lamb in London? Is it morally better for a vegetarian to eat meat that is past its sell by date and discarded in a dumpster by a supermarket, so that at least the animal will have not died for nothing?

Food and morality was the theme of this years Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery which took place in St Catz College, Oxford on the 8 and 9 September, and the above questions were among many debated by the unique collection of chefs, food historians, scientists, food writers, and general food enthusiasts who attend this annual event, now in its 26th year.

The opening address was given by Ruth Reichl, editor-in-chief of *Gourmet Magazine*, and former much feared restaurant critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*. She began by reminding us that even the hedonistic Romans attached certain morals to food, believing it was wrong to eat parrots from Africa. Christians abstained from meat for about half the year (unless they could afford to buy special dispensations or indulgences from the church). Turbulent times have always shaped changes in both food and morality. The Black Death resulted in fewer people but more food for those who survived. The two World Wars in the 20th century drastically changed the way we eat. Canned foods were widely accepted following the World War I largely due to the conditioned tastes, and confidence of the returning soldiers. Reichl suggests that following World War II, the war industry was transformed into the food industry. Gun producers began making stoves and refrigerators, and producers of ammonia nitrate for the war effort converted into fertiliser factories. The industry grew and rationalised so much in the United States that there are now more full time prisoners than farmers.

Hunger, argued Reichl, is a political problem not an agricultural problem, and she proposed that with so many moral issues to deal with, that it is a wonder that

Hunger is a political problem not an agricultural problem... With so many moral issues to deal with, it is a wonder that any one eats at all, says Ruth Reichl, editor in chief of *Gourmet Magazine*

any one eats at all. She spoke of a young vegetarian, who as a boy wondered whilst looking at the roast lamb dinner, how the lamb managed to walk with only three legs! He now goes to college on an isolated ranch and is considering re-thinking his vegetarianism since his food has to be flown in and leaves a large carbon footprint. Reichl herself moved from being a radical vegetarian in Berkley, Califorina, in the late 1960s (who dabbled in what is termed the 'Dumpster Diet'), to follow the 'delicious revolution' inspired by Alice Waters of legendary Chez Panisse, and has been firmly omnivorous ever since.

Raymond Blanc, chef/patron of Le Manoir aux Quat'Saison was one of five invited speakers at the opening plenary session. He spoke about Japan's 'Kobe beef', and exploded the myth that these bovines are massaged with sake and treated royally. The distinctive tenderness, he suggests, is achieved mainly by enforced restrictive movement of the animals. Henrietta Green spoke about the moral problems with eating chicken that have been raised on battery farms, whilst Professor Tim Long spoke about lack of public policy on food. He argued that in purchasing food, moral questions have led to a move from 'value for money' to 'values for money'. Values for money is still a niche market with only three out of the top 10 supermarket chains in England (Co-op, Waitrose, and M&S) overly concerned with ethical sourcing of food. Armando Manni spoke of the morality of labelling laws that allow the false advertising of extra virgin olive oil. The final speaker was John Scharffenberger of Scharffen Berger Chocolate Makers who discussed his experience of sourcing fairly traded cacao. Working closely with the farmers, they now produce better quality cocoa, which is more expensive and increases the farmers' wages, but produces better chocolate for which the customer is willing to pay a premium. Cocoa production, he assures us, is fairly environmentally sound.

Speaking of chocolate, the American friends of the Oxford Symposium were selling indulgences as a fundraiser. Barbara Ketchum Wheaton suggested that if you eat chocolate bars you need an indulgence to clear you from being linked with the exploitation of African workers. If you don't eat chocolate you need to purchase an indulgence for denying the same African workers employment! This dichotomy was summarised thus by Ruth Reichl, 'most of us would like to do the right thing if we only knew what that is'.

There were 56 papers presented at parallel sessions over the two days of the Symposium on disparate topics from the moral economy of meat in Australia, to how the spectacle of dog-eating Igorots at the 1904 St. Louis World Fair was used to justify the American colonisation of the Philippines. Bruce Kraig elaborated on the ethical debate that arose earlier this year in North America when tainted pet food had killed a number of beloved household pets, raising questions on whether non-human animals have rights to environmental concerns. Over $36bn is spent on pet food in North America and Europe each year whilst roughly one million people suffer food insecurity, many subsisting on one dollar a day. Kraig's environmentally sound solution is that pets

Kobe beef

should be recycled as food! Environmental issues were widely debated, with the issue of food miles leading to the growth of 'locavores' (people who only eat locally grown food). There is even a movement called 'outstanding in the field' which sets up al fresco gourmet dinners in organic farmers fields using only locally grown produce. This noble idea has become so fashionable that guests are flying in from all around America to eat locally, leaving a huge carbon footprint that the movement originally set out to avoid.

There were a number of papers on food adulteration at various times in history with many parallels apparent from practices today and those as far back as 17th century London. Colleen Taylor Sen asked whether Jainism, the unconditionally vegetarian religion which developed in India in the 6th century BC, is the world's most ethical. Jains do not eat meat, fish, eggs, and foods whose production kills the plant, harms microscopic organisms, or destroys the germs of future life. At the other end of the spectrum, Len Fisher's paper titled 'Scientists and Food – Moral, Immoral or Amoral?' asked when you sup with a scientist, should you use a long spoon? He gave examples of soy sauce produced in a Chinese factory from hair gathered from barbers floors and hospitals that had been broken down into an amino acid soup. He suggested that if science enhances our eating experience it is good, otherwise it is bad. He concluded by preaching 'Practice safe eating – always use condiments'. ◆

The themes for forthcoming symposia are agreed in advance; the theme for 2008 is 'Vegetables', 2009 is 'Food and Language' and for 2010 the theme is 'Preserved, Cured or Pickled Food'. MÁIRTÍN MAC CON IOMAIRE is a lecturer in Culinary Arts at DIT Cathal Brugha Street and presenter of Aingeal sa Chistin on TG4.